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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed six prime-time television shows--"The Cosby Show," "Cheers," "Dear John," "Designing Women," "Golden Girls," and "Roseanne"--to examine group communication as it is portrayed on a daily basis in these shows, or how groups interact in the sitcom genre. One episode of each of the six 30-minute shows was selected for analysis, in each case an episode that centered around a group of characters and their interaction. Sequentially fragmented, edited versions that contained only the scenes where group interaction occurred were diagrammed and accompanied by a synopsis of the scene, an identification of the group unit, and an identification of the apparent group purpose. Several general themes came through in the episodes examined: (1) even though the shows use a group context for interaction, group interaction generally means personal problem solving; (2) while there are differences in the dominance of the members, the differences in friendly and unfriendly behaviors are the ones that give the groups their flavor; (3) non-central characters in the story lines are the ones most often in the swing area between the dominant subgroups of the story; and (4) work is romanticized. Future research on group communication might work toward new definitions of the nature of group goals and group tasks; more detail about group interaction is needed. (Thirty-seven references, six diagrams, two tables of data, and a chart are included, and an appendix detailing group shows considered for analysis is attached.) (SG)

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# GROUPS IN ACTION ON PRIME-TIME TV

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A great deal of programming on prime-time television is focused on the group context. Sitcoms, in particular, are centered around work groups, family/living units, and social and support groups. Demographic variables of sitcom characters have been studied while other studies have focused on sitcom interaction at the dyadic or interact level. Little attention has been paid to how groups interact in the sitcom genre. To take an initial look at that interaction, six shows--The Cosby Show, Cheers, Dear John, Designing Women, Golden Girls, and Roseanne--were selected for analysis. Generalizations about group communication in this context are made, as well as recommendations for the future research and instruction of group communication.

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Francisco, November, 1989.

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GROUPS IN ACTION ON PRIME-TIME TV

Groups are part of the central fabric of American life (McGrath, 1984). We live, work, play, and find solace in groups. As the field of communication began to specify contextual areas, Bormann (1970) argued that work groups and traditional decision making groups should be the focus of the discipline's research and teaching. Because of that perspective, group communication centers around groups with clear boundaries, tasks, and goals. Introductory level group communication texts (as examples, see Beebe & Masterson, 1986; Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Cragan & Wright, 1986; and Wilson & Hanna, 1990) accept this definition of the group communication context and clearly state their focus as discussion or decision making groups. As a result, text content is generally confined to helping groups become more productive, effective, and satisfying in task completion.

If groups are central to the complexity and connectedness of our culture, why isn't more time spent focusing on the other groups that are a part of our lives? Young students are introduced to working in groups at an early age (in kindergarten I can still remember biting Mikey because he was giving the blocks we were playing with to Christy and not me). But other than being given the sage advice to "play nicely in your group, Joann" I have few memories of anyone taking me aside and instructing me in the how's and why's of group process and group communication. Throughout grade school and junior high, a great deal of academic (formal) and social learning (informal) is undertaken in groups, but I don't remember specific attention being given to learning how to interact in a group.

I discovered the concept of "teamwork" during high school when I was captain of the majorette squad and chairman of the spirit committee. In those leadership positions, I was given instruction on how to march 8 steps to 5 yards and how to mix tempura paints, but no one gave me "instruction" on interacting in groups. Largely through experience, I learned what made people work well together and how over aggressive leadership angered others. I learned how social groups formed, but I experienced a great deal of confusion and frustration in trying to explain

to Terry, my best friend, why my clique refused to include her. My learning about groups only occurred by my being in a group. The problem with this learning structure is that I learned one way of dealing with group process--the way of that particular group. Often, I observed others and then interacted as they had done. I knew few alternatives and had nowhere to turn for advice.

Once in the business world, I was evaluated by my employer on how well I interacted in a group. In those instances, I frequently found out what I did wrong; seldom knowing what I did right. Finally, in college I found the course for me--group discussion. With a focus on task or decision making groups, we discussed the merits of nuclear weapons, the rights of women, and whether campus life was serving the needs of nontraditional students. I was learning about groups that make decisions, how to make them work, what to do as a leader and a follower, how to move a group toward a decision, and how to resolve group conflict. I was finally reading in a text and gleaning through lecture "what to do with a group of people". I wish that an "operator's" manual had been available earlier on.

As I think back to the many varied group experiences I have encountered (and endured), I recognize that my earlier experiential learning may have sufficed because I was getting additional information and reinforcement about group interaction from another instructor--the tube. I recall hours of watching The Danny Thomas Show, Leave It To Beaver, F Troop, Gilligan's Island and Lost in Space. I was learning by watching others interact in groups on TV even if it was an idealistic world outside of my realm of experience.

As a group communication researcher and teacher, I find myself using references to television groups to get the point across to my students. These referents make sense to my students and they are convenient. Generally, students are familiar with these groups and groups within one show are fairly consistent in their interaction patterns as well as their approach to problem solving and conflict resolution.

But in all good analogies, there are some inconsistencies. Television groups portray experiences that are somewhat unlike our real group experiences. Problems are too neatly defined; solutions appear within a limited temporal framework; consequences are seldom considered. And I began to wonder: What are we learning about group interaction from television?

If we believe that television reflects our lives and that television programming may create additional input into decisions about how we lead our lives, we must recognize that a good deal of television programming revolves around groups. Family groups were the dominant focus of earlier television programs; after a heavy emphasis on medical groups, other work groups are now found at the center of group interaction on television. In contrast, research has done little to explore how groups interact in the context of television programming.

Television family research has focused on character demographics and the type of communication the characters use (Glennon & Butsch, 1982; Greenberg, Hines, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Atkin, 1980; Greenberg, Simmons, Hogan, & Atkin, 1980; Henderson, Greenberg, & Atkin, 1980; Skill, Robinson, & Wallace, 1987; Skill, Wallace, & Cassata, 1989; and Thomas & Callahan, 1982). Little has been done to investigate the interaction among group characters. The premise of some of the television family research is that television families affect how we interact in our families (Skill, Wallace, & Cassata, in press). If that is true, then how characters interact in other group settings should affect our notions of those groups as well.

A review of the existing literature does not reveal any investigation that focuses on the nature of the group interaction in television programming. We believe this is an important area of study when "the small group is one of the most enduring and most frequently studied areas of inquiry in social psychology . . . the small group has been studied in a tremendous variety of settings, ranging from the laboratory to the delinquent gang and the large industrial organization" (DeLamater, 1974). It has not, however, been studied on one of culture's most impacting

mediums--television. Because this study is the first of its kind and exploratory in nature, this investigation revolves around preliminary description of TV group interaction and research questions rather than specific hypotheses. To propose hypotheses at this point is premature. I simply wanted to see what was there--what messages are prime-time television programs sending about living, playing, working, and socializing in groups.

## METHODOLOGY

To help answer these questions and satisfy my curiosity, I began watching what I considered to be the "group" shows on TV (see Appendix A). To narrow the data set, I selected Cheers, The Cosby Show, Dear John, Designing Women, Golden Girls, and Roseanne because of their episodic focus on groups, and because these shows have both high viewer ratings and critical acclaim according to industry standards. Roseanne and Dear John, new shows for the 88-89 television season, were tagged as "hits" by industry watchers as advertising agencies sold commercial space prior to the preview week (Forkan, 1988). The other shows have developed substantial audience followings; most are in syndication. As a set, these six shows represent work, family/living unit, social, and support groups. The characters in these groups appear to be life-like (unlike the Mork character of Mork and Mindy or Alf of ALF) and interact in groups like we deal with on a daily basis.

A review of sitcom definitions indicates that each of these shows have been developed within that genre.

> A sitcom is normally an open-ended series of thirty-minute self-contained television episodes which revolve around a single umbrella plot or situation and a regular cast of core characters. Sitcom is distinguished from other television drama in that its dominant themes and style are broadly played comedy; it generally involves stereotypical characters and ritualistic humor (repetition and "running gags"); and it frequently incorporates an irrational approach

to reality, leaning strongly on blindness and concealment. Sitcom also differs from other television drama in that it is usually staged in limited, shallow, unconnected sets with broad, flat lighting, suggesting that it is being played through a proscenium arch to a real audience. . . . The typical story formula for sitcom is "establishment, complication, confusion and resolution." Plots tend to be superficial and simplistic, and there is seldom any genuine villainy or dramatic depth. All shows have happy or at least upbeat endings. (Hough, 1981, p. 204).

Mintz (1985) presents the same basic definition of a sitcom, but emphasizes the finite quality; "what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour" (p. 115). He continues

> the most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored. Sitcoms open up with "situation normal status quo," flirt with alteration of the group/individual serenity of cast member(s), and provide what Newcomb refers to as "the return to normalcy". (p. 115)

The happy ending then becomes a primary factor of the widespread appeal of situation comedies. This within-episode presentation-of-problem, resolution-of-problem format has been challenged. Marc (1984) states "no single episode of a sitcom is likely to be of much interest; it may not even be intelligible. The attraction of an episode is the strength of its contribution to the broader cosmology of the series" (p. 12). Either perspective on genre format generates a need for a group of characters to support the pivotal character(s) in problem recognition and resolution or in the development of the character(s) across time.

Berman (1987) comments how the sitcom genre has developed into a standard format that is

> supposed to "relate" to it[sic] audience. It does so . . . by creating characters who are supposed to resemble and represent the

audience. Second, it dramatizes events or conditions . . . that provide motivation for a plot. Third, the sitcom suggests an attitude toward things, and toward ourselves. (p. 13)

The six shows selected for analysis fit these descriptions of the sitcom genre.

Data Sample

Starting in January and ending in May of 1989, each airing episode was videotaped. A student assistant watched each show and wrote a two or three sentence capsule of the plot. The researcher scanned each episode for occurrences of group communication. Group interaction was defined as verbal or nonverbal interaction among three or more characters. Each occurrence was listed and described. Our group definition and interpretation of group context is congruent with Shaw's (1976) definition of group communication that includes: 1) three or more individuals; 2) a perception among interactants they they belong to the group; 3) face-to-face interaction; 4) interactants are dependent upon one another; and 5) interactants are working together for a common goal. However, not all of the interacting characters had to be visually apparent in each shot that comprised the scene, but characters did have to be within the parameters of the scene. As an example, on the episode of Designing Women, Charlene and Mary Jo are in the office having a discussion; Suzanne walks in and joins them. This is where the coding of group interaction begins. During the scene, Julia walks into the living room and joins the interaction. During this 2:27 of group interaction, the camera focuses our attention on first one character, then another as they send and respond to messages delivered by others. The scene comes to a natural end as the interaction concludes and the episode shifts to another location. This is where the coding of the group interaction terminated.

After listing all of the group interaction sequences, a qualitative decision was made to classify each episode as having "little or no group interaction" or as having "sufficient group interaction to pursue for this

study". Many of the "little or no group interaction" episodes had many short (5-10 seconds) sequences of group interaction, but these were too fragmented or contained too many groups (usually non-central characters) to code for our purposes. Of the 46 taped episodes, nearly 48% had sufficient group interaction to analyze for this project. Table 1 displays the details of the full data set.

Table 1

Full Data Set of Group Centered Prime-Time Shows

| Show (# of episodes) | Little/No Group Interaction | Sufficient Group Interaction |
|---|---|---|
| Cheers (7) | 5 | 2 |
| The Cosby Show (8) | 5 | 3 |
| Dear John (6) | 3 | 3 |
| Designing Women (7) | 2 | 5 |
| Golden Girls (8) | 2 | 6 |
| Roseanne (10) | 7 | 3 |

One episode of each of the six 30 minute prime-time shows was selected for detailed analysis. The criteria for selection were: 1) the central plot of that episode centered around a group of characters and their interaction; and 2) this particular episode was the best representation of group communication of all episodes of that show. There was no attempt to evaluate the group interaction as effective or efficient. Table 2 describes each of the episodes selected.

Table 2

Selected Group Interaction Episodes

| Show | Air Date | Plot Summary |
|---|---|---|
| Cheers | 3-16-89 | The Joint Chief of Staff visits the bar. Rebecca believes he stole her diamond earrings. The "regulars" help Sam solve the mystery. |
| The Cosby Show | | Theo's girlfriend dumps him for another guy. His friends encourage him to consult a witch doctor for help. |
| Dear John | 2/20/89 | Louise's pregnancy is showing. The group finally confronts her and supports her in telling the father. They have a baby shower for her. |
| Designing Women | 2/14/89 | Suzanne and Julia's nieces come to visit. The decorating firm is hired to redecorate a nudist colony. |
| Golden Girls | 3/11/89 | Sophia volunteers at the hospital. It's a rainy day and the others share stories as they try to decide what to do around the house. |
| Roseanne | | Roseanne works overtime. Dan tries to get the rest of the family to help with the household chores. |

Under the supervision of the researcher, a student assistant edited out the commercials, promos, signature lead-ins and lead-outs, and the parts of the show devoted to dyadic interaction or single character action. The result was sequentially ordered fragmented versions of six shows that contained only the scenes where group interaction (three or more characters) occurred. These became the data for this project.

Because not all coders were intimately familiar with all of the shows, I reviewed the group segments again and prepared an interaction diagram of each group scene for each show. This was accompanied by a synopsis of the scene, an identification of the group unit, and an identification of the apparent group purpose. These notes about the episode became our "map" as the coders used Polley's (1989, 1987) Group Field Dynamics adjective rating form to code the group interaction.

Coding Instrument

Group Field Dynamics (GFD) is an outgrowth of Bales and Cohen's (1979) SYMLOG (System for Multiple Level Observation of Groups). Also using concepts from Lewin's Field Theory and Moreno's Sociometry, Polley's GFD is both a theory and method for analyzing face-to-face interaction in groups. In GFD, data is collected by coding subjects on 26 adjective phrases that describe verbal and nonverbal communication behavior. The 26 phrases represent the pure, double, and triple permutations of the three underlying dimensions: 1) dominant-submissive (U-D); 2) friendly-unfriendly (P-N); and 3) conventional-unconventional (F-B). Coding is collapsed to identify a point for each character on each dimension. Together the ratings put subjects in an interaction space allowing within-group comparisons and across group comparisons.

The interaction space shows the friendly-unfriendly (P-N) dimension on the horizontal plane--the right anchored by P; the left anchored by N. The conventional-unconventional dimension is displayed on the vertical plane. Conventional (F) is anchored at the top of the space; unconventional (B) behavior is anchored at the bottom. The dominant-submissive dimension is shown by the size of the subject's circle which indicates their plotting point on the other two dimensions. Larger circles indicate dominance (U); smaller circles indicate submissive (D) behavior.

Procedure

Three coders used the following procedures to code the data. Coders reviewed the scene summary and group identity/purpose notes for the episode they were about to watch. Coders then reviewed the 26 GFD adjective phrases. After this review, the group edited version of the show was viewed in its entirety. Five second blackbursts separated scenes; a thirty second blackburst indicated the end of the show. At the end of this first viewing, coders again reviewed the adjective phrases on the GFD rating sheet. The first scene was viewed again followed by a review of the GFD adjective phrases. These steps were repeated for each scene regardless of the length of the scenes (the shortest scene was six seconds; the longest

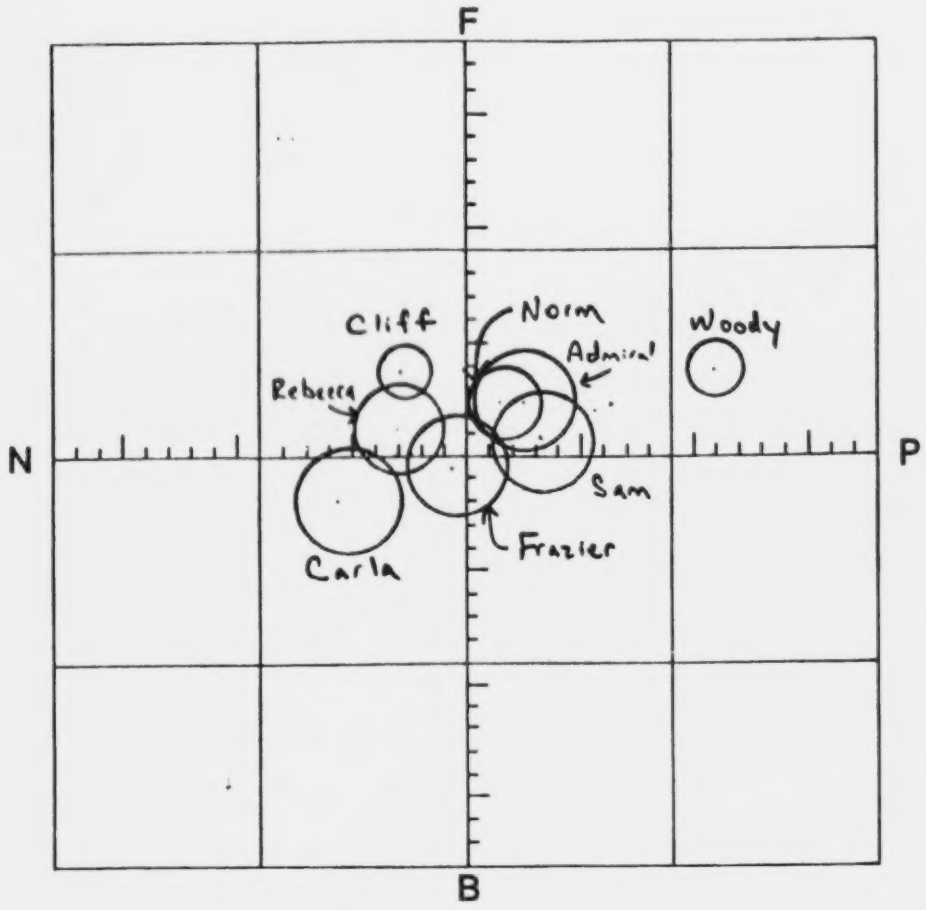
was seven minutes). At the end of this second full viewing, coders independently rated each character on each adjective phrase using the following instructions: 1) think of how that character interacted (verbally and nonverbally); and 2) think of each character's interaction relative to that character not the amount of time a character is on screen relative to other characters in the show. This second instruction was issued as a precaution to awarding a character that was always on screen a dominant rating and a character that was seldom on screen a passive rating. Because of the nature of the GFD methodology (and that all coders were not group researchers) coders were reminded that the coding scheme allowed for the same character to be coded as interacting in both poles of the same dimension.

RESULTS

The coding results of each show will be presented separately. A discussion of the general themes will follow.

Cheers

The GFD ratings resulted in the following locations for the Cheers' characters.




| Character/ | Woody | Norm | Cliff | Frazier | Carla | Rebecca | Sam | Admiral |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance-Submissive | | | | | | | | |
| U-D | -4.3 | -1.3 | -4.7 | 4.0 | 5.0 | 1.7 | 3.7 | 3.7 |
| Friendly-Unfriendly | | | | | | | | |
| P-N | 11.0 | 1.3 | -2.3 | -0.7 | -5.7 | -3.0 | 3.3 | 2.7 |
| Conventional-Unconventional | | | | | | | | |
| F-B | 3.7 | 2.3 | 3.7 | -0.7 | -2.7 | 1.0 | 0.7 | 2.7 |

The reliabilities for the three coders were .91 for the U-D dimension, .84 for the P-N dimension, and .60 for the F-B dimension. These rating positions indicate that the Cheers' characters form a fairly cohesive group

with Woody, the bartender, anchoring the group on the positive or friendly side of the space. Carla, the waitress, anchors the negative or unfriendly side of the space. The characters were coded as having little differences on the conventional-unconventional dimension. Carla is the most unconventional character while bar patrons Cliff and Norm, and Woody are the most conventional of the regular cast. The codings reflect the dominance-submissiveness hierarchy that exists around the bar. Carla, in her own fashion, runs the bar by moving in and out of relationships. She seems to "pop up" when she is least expected. Her unpredictability (which contributes to her unconventional ratings) is, in fact, predictable. Her assertive, caustic nature lends to her dominant and negative rating. Cliff, Norm, and Woody provide support for other characters, particularly Sam, the ex-baseball player and ex-bar owner, as they listen to his trials and tribulations with women and support his scheming to get the elusive Rebecca who currently manages the bar.

The Cheers group is an embedded group consisting of both work colleagues and social friends. In past episodes, the groups have socialized outside of the bar together. Within the confines of the bar, the groups are often integrated as one. The environment of Cheers (the main bar room) allows the group to have transparent and transmutable boundaries. Whoever is sitting around the bar is part of the group often because they are within earshot of the conversation. An interaction norm allows all who hear to enter into the discussion.

The work group members have defined duties (Carla waits on tables, Woody works behind the bar, and Rebecca manages the operation, while Sam shuffles among all three positions). Other than Rebecca, all have adopted having fun as their primary goal. To have fun, they engage the regular bar patrons (Cliff, Norm, Frazier) in their work conversations and join the customers in their personal conversations. The Cheers bar has become a place for friends to socialize, discuss personal problems, and make fun of those not included in their interaction. The embedded group regularly

trades insults and jabs, often culminating in one-upmanship style interaction.

Within this particular episode there are two themes devoted to the group interaction (14:44). First, the embedded group shares stories and socializes about their daily activities. Sam and Rebecca have both been invited to a charity gala; both get phone calls canceling their dates. Woody wants Carla to teach him how to crack his knuckles, blow a whistle with two fingers, and make "raspberry" sounds. This sets up Carla as the expert and she engages everyone except Sam, Rebecca, and Frazier into these activities. Sam and Rebecca are more worried about their dates and their subsequent cancellations; Frazier sets himself apart from the rest of the group to provide technical and scientific information to substantiate Carla's claims. Within this story theme, Woody, Norm, Cliff, Frazier, and Carla are the main characters; they interact to share information three times and Carla leads the group through two demonstrations.

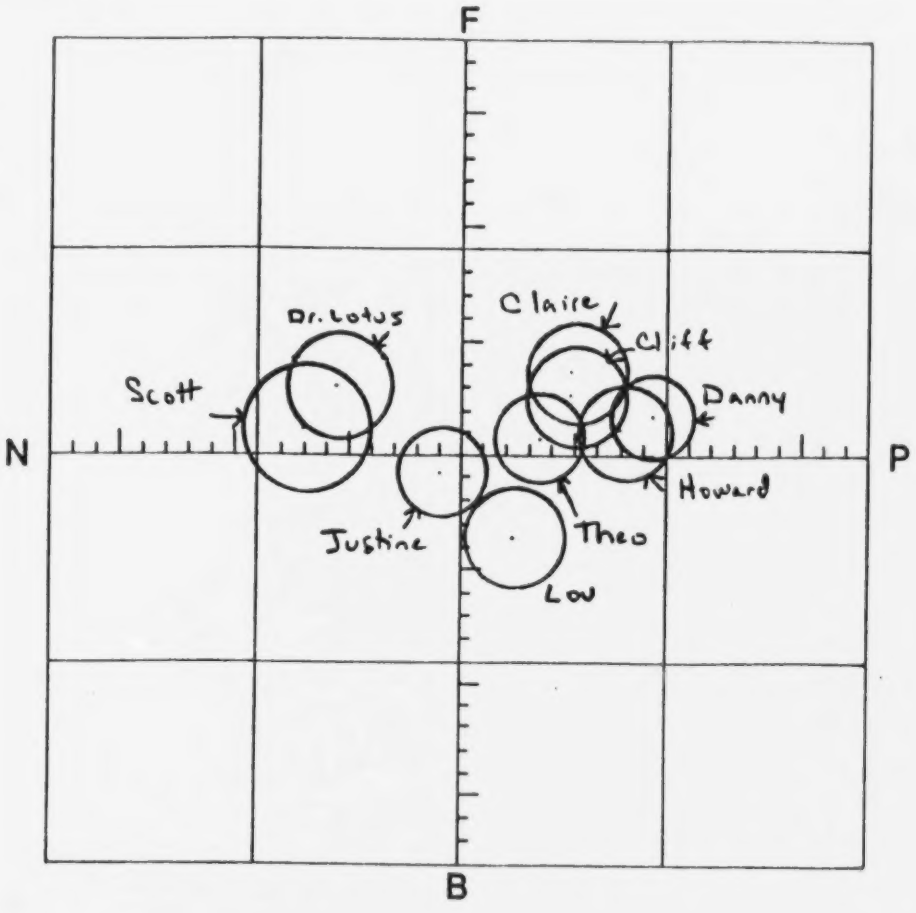
The second theme of group interaction revolves around the problem of Rebecca's lost earrings. To make sure she makes an impression at the gala, Rebecca borrows a pair of diamond earrings. She is careless and leaves the earrings in a tumbler on her desk. Sam returns from the gala event (yes, he goes alone) with Admiral Crowe, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Admiral uses her office to make a phone call and later Rebecca notices the earrings missing. She becomes hysterical and automatically accuses the Admiral of stealing the earrings. Rebecca promises Sam that she will do anything to get the earrings back. Sam jumps on the opportunity and engages both customer and work groups to help in finding Rebecca's earrings. Within this story line, all of the characters interact to: 1) impress the Admiral, 2) discuss the Admiral's visit, 3) define Rebecca's problem, 4) find a solution to Rebecca's problem, and 5) solve Rebecca's problem.

In this episode of Cheers, the embedded group interacts in eight group scenes in a spontaneous fashion with group members coming into and leaving the group conversation several times. The two group interaction themes do

center around group activities, although the goals of the groups are spontaneous in response to what is happening in the bar at the moment. While the group does find a solution to Rebecca's problem, the main purpose of the group interaction appears to be to provide an audience for each others' reflections and comments on the world.

The Cosby Show

The GFD ratings resulted in the following locations for the episode's characters:




| Character/ | Theo | Lou | Howard | Danny | Scott | Justine | Clair | Cliff | Doctor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance-Submissive | | | | | | | | | |
| U-D | 2.3 | 3.7 | 2.7 | 0.7 | 9.3 | 2.3 | 4.0 | 3.7 | 5.0 |
| Friendly-Unfriendly | | | | | | | | | |
| P-N | 3.3 | 2.7 | 7.0 | 8.3 | -7.0 | -1.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 | -6.0 |
| Conventional-Unconventional | | | | | | | | | |
| F-B | 0.7 | -3.7 | 1.0 | 1.7 | 1.0 | -0.7 | 4.0 | 2.7 | 3.3 |

The coder reliabilities were .39 for the U-D dimension, .74 for the P-N dimension, and .51 for the F-B dimension. The codings reflect the primary relationship groupings of the characters. Theo and his friends (Lou, Howard, and Danny) were coded very similarly resulting in a positive cohesive subgroup that is differentiated from the negative subgroup that contains Dr. Lotus, the witch doctor, and Scott, the man who steals Justine

away from Theo. Justine, the girlfriend, is coded in what Bales and Cohen (1979) describe as the swing area. Between Theo and Scott, Justine is in a position where she could be persuaded to join either group. Clair and Cliff, Theo's parents, have relatively minor parts in this show and are coded as being very similar to one another and similar to Theo's group of friends.

This group interaction (12:29) in this episode centers around Theo and his problem in getting rid of the man who has caught the attention of his girlfriend. After Theo recognizes the problem, his friends emphasize the magnitude of the problem, introduce the solution to Theo ("Theo, my man, your problems are behind you. What man do you want to get rid of?), and support him as he meets with the witch doctor. When the group visits the witch doctor to search for alternatives, Lou takes on owning the problem for Theo and the group: "You see, we want you take care of this guy". Dr. Lotus asks Theo questions; his friends respond for him. The group is the vehicle for the individual to recognize his problem and move toward some type of problem resolution.

There is only one main group interaction theme to this episode. And while the story focuses on Theo, the groups that support him, his friends and his parents, are the forces that move Theo to finally resolve the problem on his own. In this episode of The Cosby Show, some groups meet specifically to discuss a certain topic and others are spontaneous groups that arise out of the situation. Theo meets with his friends three times--first to identify the problem, second to discuss alternatives, and third to meet with an expert. Each time, the group appears to have been "called to order" by someone other than Theo. It appears that the group is leading Theo into dealing with the problem. There are two spontaneous groups. The first is when Theo confronts Justine and Scott; the second is when Theo tests the witch doctor solution which his friends support on his parents. Beyond these six group scenes that are integrated into the story, one group scene spontaneously occurs as Theo's friends speak very briefly with Cliff

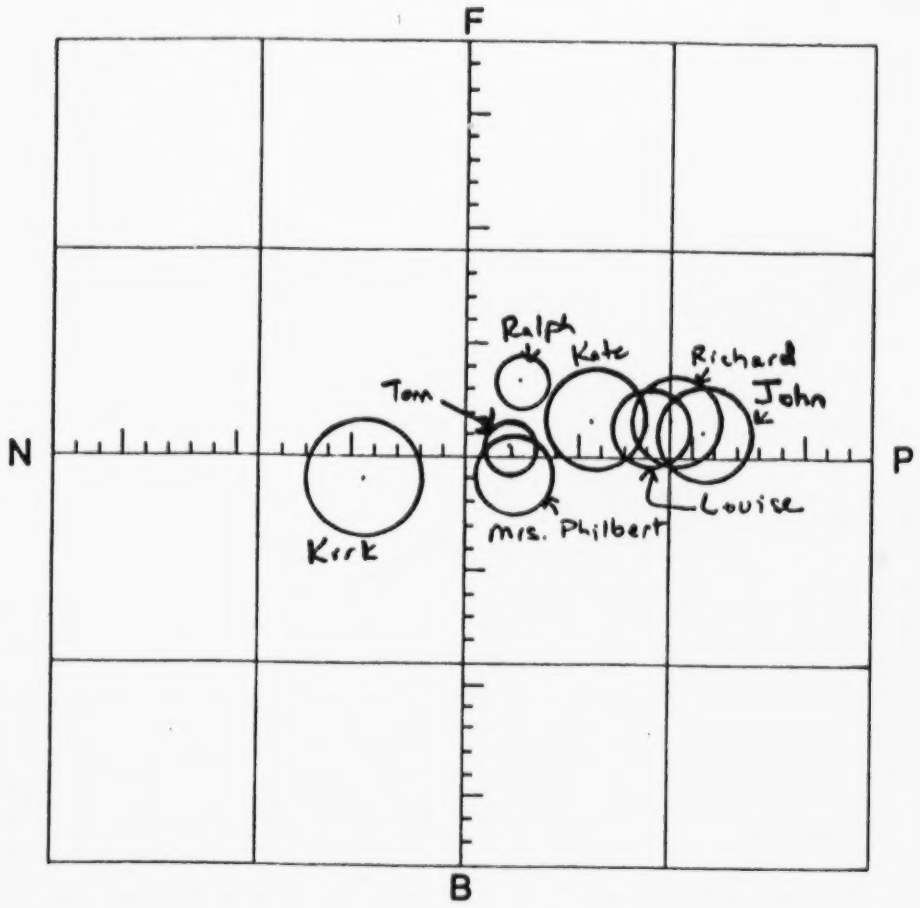
as he lets them into the house to meet with Theo.

In this episode of The Cosby Show, the groups are vehicles to move the central character of the story through problem resolution. The two groups share Theo as a common member. Thus, he gets advice from many on what to do about his problem.

An additional comment is needed here. Much of what I read about TV sitcoms suggests, like Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg (1980) do, that the portrayal of Black characters on television is different than white characters. In watching this and other episodes of Cosby, I thought that any racial context was negligible and that any of these characters could be of other racial or ethnic groups. Race had nothing to do with the definition of the problem, cause, or solution of the problem. The issues on The Cosby Show do not rest on the characters being Black. They rest on them being human.

Dear John

The characters of this episode have the following GFD locations:




| Character/ | John | Louise | Ralph | Kirk | Kate | Mrs. Philbert | Tom | Richard |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance-Submissive | | | | | | | | |
| U-D | 2.7 | -0.3 | -5.0 | 6.7 | 3.7 | 0.0 | -5.3 | 2.3 |
| Friendly-Unfriendly | | | | | | | | |
| P-N | 10.3 | 8.0 | 2.3 | -4.3 | 5.7 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 9.0 |
| Conventional-Unconventional | | | | | | | | |
| F-B | 1.0 | 1.7 | 3.3 | -1.0 | 1.3 | -1.0 | 0.3 | 1.7 |

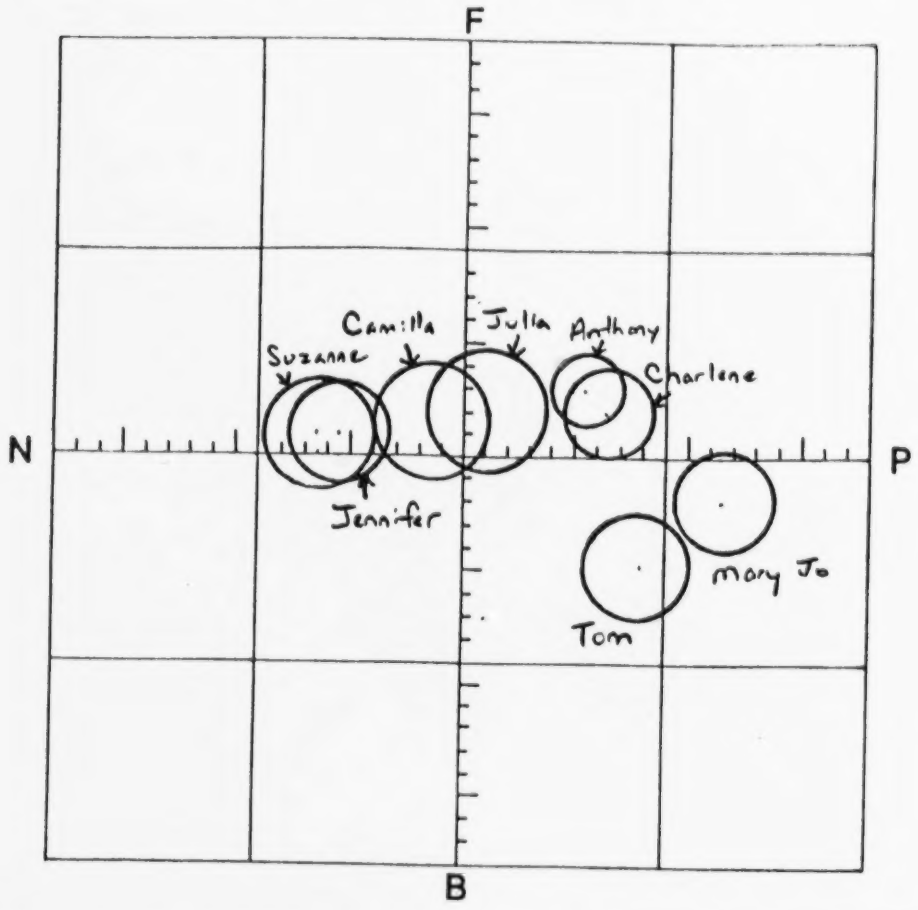
The reliabilities for these codings are .87 for the U-D dimension, .81 for the P-N dimension, and .69 for the F-B dimension. Overall, the characters form a friendly group made up of three subgroups that are differentiated along the P-N dimension. John, Louise, Kate, and Richard are members of the friendly subgroup. Ralph, Tom, and Mrs. Philbert are neutral on the friendly-unfriendly dimension. Kirk is a scapegoat and alone anchors the unfriendly pole of the P-N dimension.

This show centers around the "One to One" support group for recently divorced or separated persons. In previous episodes, Louise, the group leader or counselor, lends her personal and professional support to the other characters to help them cope with the problems they face as singles. In this episode, the roles are reversed and the group becomes supportive of Louise as she publicly announces her already recognizable pregnancy, tells the father of her baby that she is pregnant, and then refuses his offer of marriage. As in The Cosby Show, the group is the catalyst for Louise to own up to her problem and move toward its resolution. In this show, however, Louise deals with the problem on her own after she has discussed the problem with the group and has received their encouragement.

In the five group interaction sequences (15:26) in this episode, the interaction is focused on discussion and support. Three of the group sequences revolve around group interaction that is planned to occur. The support group meets twice at their usual time and location to provide personal support for one another (the usual goal of this group), but in each meeting they reciprocate their support to Louise making their support of her their goal. In the third specific meeting of the characters, John has invited all of the group members to a baby shower for Louise. One group meeting appears to be spontaneous, but is really planned, once again to be supportive of Louise. Louise is to meet the father of her baby at a local bar to tell him she is pregnant. The group members find out when and where the meeting is to take place and all show up as if they "just happen to be in the neighborhood". This episode is unusual that all of the eight characters are in each group interaction sequence.

Designing Women

The GFD locations for this group of characters is:




| Character/Suzanne | Charlene | MaryJo | Julia | Anthony | Tom | Camilla | Jennifer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance-Submissive | | | | | | | |
| U-D 5.7 | 1.7 | 4.0 | 7.7 | -0.7 | 4.7 | 6.7 | 3.7 |
| Friendly-Unfriendly | | | | | | | |
| P-N -6.7 | 6.7 | 11.3 | 1.0 | 5.3 | 8.3 | -1.3 | -5.3 |
| Conventional-Unconventional | | | | | | | |
| F-B 0.7 | 2.0 | -2.3 | 2.0 | 3.0 | -5.0 | 1.3 | 1.0 |

The reliabilities for these ratings are .78 for the U-D dimension, .91 for the P-N dimension, and .34 for the F-B dimension. This group of characters are fairly dominant, show some differences on the conventional-unconventional dimension, and are well distributed on the P-N dimension. In this episode, Suzanne and Julia's nieces visit for the first time. Both Charlene and Mary Jo immediately recognize the nieces, Jennifer and Camilla, as younger versions of their colleagues. Suzanne and Julia are

resistant to this, but eventually own up the likeness and counsel their nieces that "when you're annoying her and she's insulting you, then that's the way it's supposed to be". As a result of these similarities, Suzanne and Jennifer are coded in a similar manner--dominant and unfriendly. Julia and Camilla are coded dominant and neutral on the P-N dimension, because although both can be very assertive, they rationalize their behaviors to others which makes others more accepting of their behavior. Anthony and Charlene are in their own subgroup which is friendly and less dominant. Mary Jo and the client, Tom, are coded as dominant, very friendly, and unconventional in comparison to the rest of the characters. These two characters represent the "alternative" life style of which Suzanne, Julia, and Charlene are so opposed. Tom, the client, represents his nudist colony and wants the decorating firm to refurbish the colony's den. Mary Jo is astounded by the nudity, but admits that "they do make a point". As in other episodes, Mary Jo provides the counter point or the alter-conscience of the group of women.

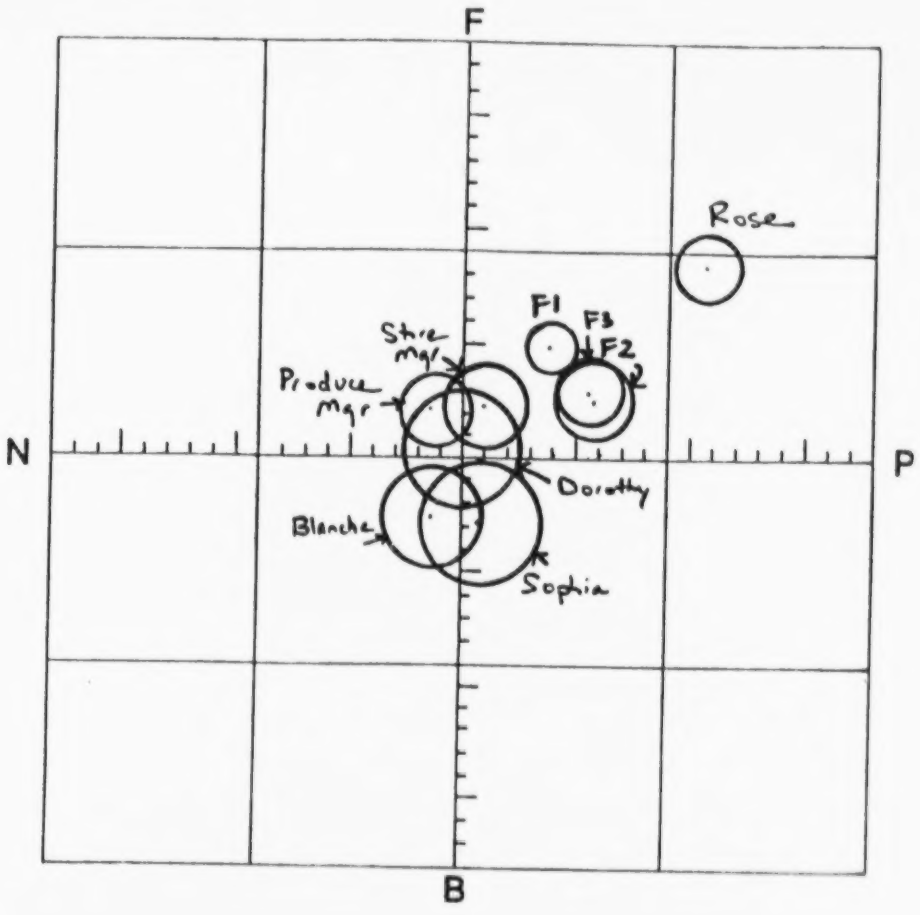
Within the decorating story theme, there is only one specific group meeting with an apparent meeting time, place and goal. This occurs when Mary Jo, Charlene, and Anthony representing Sugarbaker's (the design/decorating firm) go to the nudist colony to meet the client. The other group interactions occur spontaneously as group members go about their daily business and activities in the decorating office. Because of the unusual nature of the client, the decorating group spends a great deal of time sharing their feelings and concerns about nudity. Knowing one another personally as well as professionally allows the work unit to deal more openly with the awkwardness of the situation.

The second story line revolves around Julia and Suzanne meeting their nieces. This is embedded into the first story line as all of the family group interaction that the audience sees takes place in front of others in the work group. The decorating office of Designing Women is the downstairs of Julia's home, and like the environment of Cheers, it is large and spacious, allowing groups to develop spontaneously. The openness pulls

others into the discussion as they "listen in"; it allows interactants to call to others to get support for their viewpoint. Of the shows and episodes selected for this study, the two story lines (19:26) and the two groups of Designing Women are most intertwined. The resolution of the design project problems and the family conflict occurs together in one scene which serves as both the final group and final episode scene. Although the membership in the two groups is separate and clearly identified, interaction about the groups' problems and interaction between the two groups is so blended it is difficult to tell where one begins and ends.

## The Golden Girls

The characters of The Golden Girls were coded in the following GFD locations:




| Character/ | Rose | Dorothy | Blanche | Sophia | F1* | Produce | Mgr | F2* | F3* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance-Submissive | | | | | | | | | |
| U-D | -2.0 | 7.0 | 4.0 | 7.7 | -6.3 | -1.3 | 0.7 | -0.3 | -1.7 |
| Friendly-Unfriendly | | | | | | | | | |
| P-N | 10.7 | 0.0 | -1.7 | 0.3 | 4.0 | -1.7 | 1.0 | 6.0 | 5.7 |
| Conventional-Unconventional | | | | | | | | | |
| F-B | 8.3 | 0.7 | -2.3 | -3.0 | 5.0 | 2.3 | 3.3 | 2.3 | 2.7 |

F1 = friend in the supermarket
F2 = first friend in the all-woman band
F3 = second friend in the all-woman band

The reliabilities for these codings are .85 for the U-D dimension, .90 for the P-N dimension, and .91 for the F-B dimension. This group of characters presents a different image than the other shows. This group is stretched along the P-N dimension as well as the F-B dimension. Rose

anchors the conventional and positive dimensions while Blanche and Sophia anchor the unconventional and negative dimensions of the GFD space. The other characters buffer the distance in between these two subgroups.

This episode revolves around two different subgroups: 1) three (Rose, Dorothy, and Blanche) of the four regular cast members who live together are at home on a rainy day trying to decide what to do; and 2) Sophia (the fourth member of the living unit) and her friends as she completes her daily activities. Although it is clear that Rose, Dorothy, and Blanche are making decisions about what to do, the audience never sees the group carrying through on a decision. Rather, a pattern is set up with the threesome sharing stories and talking about what to do. The scene shifts to Sophia and her group of friends just before the other group makes a decision. When the action returns to Rose, Dorothy and Blanche, the task or activity from the previous decision has been completed and they are back talking about "what to do next".

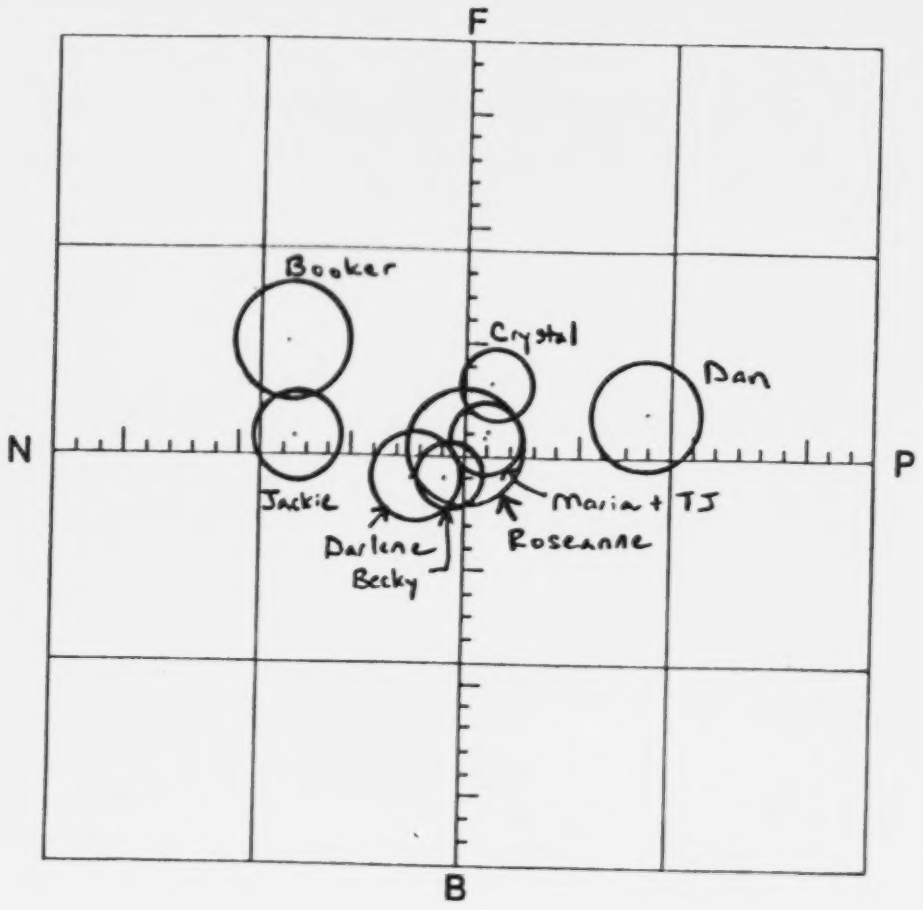
In Sophia's subgroups (first at the supermarket and then in an all-woman band), the audience sees the discussion and the activity. The audience watches Sophia lead her friend through confrontation with store management at the supermarket and working with other friends gathering charity donations by organizing and leading an all-woman band.

Because the two story lines (17:52) and the two groups are so separated, the two act to balance one another. The living unit foursome are in both the opening and closing group and episode scenes. Between those establishing and closing segments, there are three sequences devoted entirely to Rose, Dorothy, and Blanche; two are devoted to Sophia--each a separate group. In both of Sophia's groups, she is dominant, assertive, and characteristically caustic. As a character, she refuses to let others take advantage of her, and controls the situation when others have given up. Both of Sophia's groups have problems to resolve and she is the resolution. This is in contrast to Rose, Dorothy, and Blanche who are less active, and more willing to pass away the time sharing stories and

reminiscing. Their approach to problem solving is discussion, double fudge chocolate cookies, discussion, pizza, discussion, and cake. Sophia's living unit does not have information about Sophia's two other groups and their daily activities. So while each of the groups in this episode come to closure on their problem, they are entirely separate of one another.

Roseanne

The characters for this episode were coded as having the following GFD interaction space locations:




| Character/Roseanne | Dan | Crystal | Jackie | Maria | Booker | Darlene | Becky | TJ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance-Submissive | | | | | | | | |
| U-D | 7.0 | 5.7 | -0.7 | 1.7 | -1.3 | 6.7 | 1.7 | -1.7 | -2.3 |
| Friendly-Unfriendly | | | | | | | | |
| P-N | 0.0 | 8.0 | 1.7 | -7.3 | 1.0 | -8.0 | -2.7 | -1.0 | 1.0 |
| Conventional-Unconventional | | | | | | | | |
| F-B | 0.3 | 2.0 | 3.3 | 1.0 | 0.7 | 5.0 | -1.0 | -1.0 | 1.0 |

The reliabilities for these ratings are .94 for the U-D dimension, .84 for the P-N dimension, and .33 for the F-B dimension. This group of characters is stretched along the friendly-unfriendly dimension, favors conventional behaviors, with differences in dominance being related to primary versus secondary characters. Dan, Roseanne's husband, is the most positive character as he tries to find solutions to the hectic household

schedule caused by Roseanne having to work overtime. On the other end, Booker and Jackie anchor the negative pole of the dimension as they become the characters the others turn against. Roseanne's work group (Jackie, Crystal, and Maria) turn against Booker as he makes them work mandatory overtime with little warning and zero empathy. Within the work group, Roseanne, Crystal, and Maria turn against Jackie as she shows up for work late and forgets to set one of the machines causing more overtime. The household group, Roseanne, Dan and the kids--Darlene, Becky, and TJ--are the other group highlighted in this episode. The children are coded similarly as they provide the reason Roseanne and Dan need a household schedule and household order. Roseanne gets both negative and positive ratings resulting in her neutral position on the P-N dimension. She becomes the emotional barometer for both groups. She tries to remain calm and interact peacefully with both groups, but blows off steam and yells when the chaos becomes too much in both arenas.

The two central group interaction story lines occupy only 9:19 of the entire episode. Roseanne is clearly the pivotal character and the only common member to both groups. Roseanne's groups in this episode deal with conflict that is caused by the other group. The problems at home are caused because the work group makes errors leading to more overtime. The problems at work are underscored by the tension and guilt Roseanne feels by being an "absentee mother". Four of the group interaction sequences are at home; two at work. At home, the group interaction is spontaneous as family members walk through the house still carrying on conversations when others are clearly out of sight. The viewer has to assume that voices are loud enough to be heard because responses are "yelled" back. The family members do sit down one time at the kitchen table to hear Dan's "Ward Cleaver speech" to organize the family. But the attempt fails when Becky's pet hamster gets loose. Chaos resumes. At work, the visual and communication environment is quite opposite. The work group is shown in a confined space standing directly next to one another with a frontal view to

the audience. There is very little conversation about work. If Roseanne, Jackie, Crystal, and Maria are not talking about the problems of overtime they are socializing to make the long day go faster. Overall, the interaction of this episode of Roseanne can be characterized by bickering. While the goals of both groups are implied (to meet the production schedule at work; to keep the house in order), neither goal is accomplished as the audience sees Roseanne bounce back and forth between hostile environments.

It's interesting to note that the group interaction dynamics of Roseanne are not significantly different from other shows in this study. Even before airing, Roseanne was touted as being different than other family sitcoms. Although the socio-economic characteristics, interaction topics, and the grammatical syntax of the interaction is noticeably different, the characters still differentiate as the other TV groups do along the friendly-unfriendly dimension.

## DISCUSSION

I have watched these shows more than 20 times each; several general themes appear to me. First, even though the show uses a group context for its interaction, group interaction is generally used as a vehicle for personal problem solving. To compare these shows, I used the following interaction continuum:

| Roseanne<br>Cosby | Dear John<br>Golden Girls | Cheers<br>Designing Women |
|---|---|---|
| individual focus | mixed focus | group focus |

The continuum represents my subjective "feel" of the show, rather than the quantity of group interaction versus dyadic interaction. It is my response to the level of group-centered interaction and involvement demonstrated by the characters. In Cosby, the group interacted only to support an individual character's problem (Theo losing his girl); in Roseanne, the problem was focused from Roseanne's point of view even though other family members were affected. Thus, I have judged these shows to have more of an individual focus. I've judged Dear John to be of mixed focus. One character's problem is the central focus, but the characters are shown in

their typical group context and there is evidence of their group history. Golden Girls has a similar mixed focus. I've judged Cheers and Designing Women to have more of a group focus because the group and its interaction is central to the definition and resolution of the problem. The Cheers characters deal as a group with the problem of the lost earrings; the Designing Women characters deal as a group with the nudity crisis.

In watching and coding the interaction of these six episodes, it struck me that there were so few instances of group conflict and decision making. Clearly, most of the group interaction centered on discussion and the sharing of personal feelings or ideas to help or support another through the problem solving process. In reflection, my own life and the groups I encounter are much the same. I spend very little time in actual decision making or conflict with my peer groups. But we do share stories as a way of distributing our personal influence over one another's lives.

The spontaneous nature of the groups seen in these six episodes reflects how most of the groups interact in my life. Although I am a member of several committees, I spend more daily interaction time in spontaneous groups that gather around the secretary's desk or the printer. Often two of us will be talking in the hall, another colleague passes, hears the conversation and joins in. Some of our best ideas have come from these informal, spontaneous groupings. Is this still group communication? Yes. We are three or more interactants talking face-to-face who are aware of one another and are pursuing some goal. This type of informal group deserves more attention in group communication instruction and research.

The second general theme that I derive from these six episodes is that while there are differences in the dominance of members, the differences in friendly and unfriendly behaviors are the ones that give the groups their flavor and set up the contrasts and comparisons among characters that affect the story line. Perhaps this is because the P-N (friendly-unfriendly) dimension is the most simplistic of the dimensions, the easiest to "see" through overt behaviors. The U-D (dominance-submissive) and F-B

(conventional-unconventional) are more subtle and more subjective. Having to capture a plot line in 22 minutes, it makes sense that the writers and producers rely on communicative behavior that is easy to encode and decode. In each of the six episodes, the P-N dimension is the axis of interest. Subgroups form along this dimension and tensions are easily seen. Even the two shows--The Cosby Show and Roseanne--that have been declared by the popular press as being diametrically opposite use the same friendly-unfriendly tension to underscore the interaction. Joseph's (1989) review of Roseanne indicates that "what is highly unusual is the way in which the characters and family relationships are handled" (p. G5). Although reviewers and audience members may see surface differences, none resulted in this study. Only one of the six episodes (Golden Girls) had a strong additional differentiation on the conventional-unconventional (F-B) dimension.

The third generality I draw from these six episodes is that non-central characters to the story lines are the ones most often in the swing area between the dominant subgroups of the story. They are usually submissive and neutral on the P-N and F-B dimensions acting more as buffers between contrasting and (sometimes) conflicting characters.

Another striking characteristic about all of these shows is that it was extremely difficult to assess who was talking to who. Was a character addressing the group as a whole or a specific character within a group setting? This was difficult to identify as seldom were both the speaker and receiver(s) on camera. It seemed more dyadic than group focused. A second production technique that complicated interaction coding was that most interaction took place with the character facing front onto the camera or at most a 45 degree angle to the camera. Seldom did characters turn their heads the 90 degrees required to really talk eye-to-eye to others. The imposed proscenium frame did not allow groups to really interact like groups. As an example, the characters of Golden Girls regularly sit around a table in the kitchen. They appear to be in a group setting, but realistically, how many times do four people crowd around two-thirds of a

round table leaving the other third open? Visual representation of group interaction is awkward. Springston's (1989) evaluation of the production techniques used in these six episodes provides the details.

There was also a heavy reliance on nonverbal cues as group members communicated approval, disapproval, or feelings and attitudes. The visual elements of nonverbal communication (physical distance, body orientation, body posture, touch, visual orientation, facial expression, and bodily movements) received specific camera attention and focus. Identification of relationships relied heavily on these visually apparent nonverbal cues. This became clear when the sound was turned off and the episode was only visually interpreted. I could make sense of the program. But when I did not view the program and relied only upon the verbal communication, I had difficulty in following the story or understanding relationships among group members. Research on plot development and viewer understanding of character relationships via single or mixed channels would be interesting.

An immediately obvious difference between television groups and real groups was the amount of spontaneous and overlapping interaction. In the group conversations I have analyzed in my research as well as experiences in my own groups, members are always cutting in on one another, finishing sentences for others, or several people are talking at once. This <u>never</u> happened in the six shows selected for analysis for this project. Very simply, on camera group interaction calls for alternating sequences of interaction. The Spring 1989 issue of the <u>Western Journal of Speech Communication</u> is devoted entirely to the interactional organization of conversational activities in everyday communication. This collection of essays clearly identifies the occurrence of overlapping turn taking and conversational transitions. Maybe the "ideal" group interaction form portrayed on television contributes to the frustration many of us feel when interacting as part of a group.

Another generalization is that work is romanticized on these shows. We seldom see any character working even when they are at work. The

decorators of Designing Women are seen in their office and at the client's, but the audience never sees Mary Jo sketch or Charlene complete the book work. We sometimes see Anthony carry furniture items in and out. Frankly, I want Julia and Suzanne's job--if managing people and a business were only that easy! The characters do talk about work, but more generally these conversations get carried to a social level and the task is forgotten. The same is true for the work group of Cheers. Because their work is interspersed with social interaction, working at the bar seems pleasurable, and most times, fun!

Roseanne is the hardest working character I observed. But for all the complaining she and her coworkers do, it's difficult to assess just what she's complaining about. The tedious and boring aspects of her work in the plastic factory (they make plastic knives, forks, and spoons) is not accompanied by overly demanding physical work. The characters of The Golden Girls talk so little about working that it makes me think they must be independently wealthy to wear the clothes they do and live the lifestyle they live. As working parents, Clair and Cliff Huxtable of The Cosby Show are home more than any set of parents I know. When they come home from work they appear to be energized and ready to deal with the trials and tribulations with a house full of children. On Dear John, work is seldom talked about, but the characters do give the appearance that they've just come from work or that they are actively seeking employment.

It is possible that the themes that arise from these six shows have an impact on how our culture perceives group interaction. Gerbner and his colleagues, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986), propose a theory of cultivation that is concerned with the continual patterns that result from "programming to which total communities are regularly exposed over long periods of time" (p. 18). I would judge sitcoms like the ones in this study to be part of that continual message. Although Hawkins and Pingree (1981) challenge some of the cultural indicator assumptions, they do note that "cultivation does occur and can be differentiated by content types" (p. 300).

Even sitcom creator and actor, Bill Cosby, "insists that each episode educates and informs" (Johnson, 1986, p. 30). The Cosby Show scripts are reviewed by a professor of psychiatry who checks the shows "to see if they reflect psychological reality because, he [Cosby] says, 'TV shapes the perception of Black kids who watch these shows'" (p. 32). Similarly, Roseanne Barr of Roseanne comments that "it would be cool if the show opened the door for TV to really reflect the way people live in this country" (Time, 1988, December 5). Roseanne and one of the executive producers, Marcy Carsey, have said that "television has a responsibility to 'save the American family' [by] filling the airwaves with exemplary family members" and that "perfect characters who solve every problem in 22 minutes represent 'everything I hate about TV'" (Bayles, 1988). I find it difficult to connect these comments to a family show in which the Mom lists one rule of the house as "no kids allowed in the house"--meaning her own. I wonder if viewers really understand that Roseanne "loves" here kids.

Livingstone (1987) suggests that viewer perception and comprehension of television programming must be considered as

> viewers draw upon the information presented by the program, their past experiences with the program and its genre, and their own personal experiences with the social phenomena . . . referred to by the program. A program's effects are dependent upon the ways in which viewers' representations of the program are a transformation of the original. (p. 400)

Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin, and Neuendorf (1982) studied the effects of watching family television programs on what children believe about family roles. They conclude that "children's exposure to family programs which portray affiliative communication among family members leads them to perceive that real-life families are more affiliative". I wonder what the resulting effect is for children watching Roseanne.

In their recent review of prime-time television, Ellis and Armstrong (1989) review a great deal of mass communication research that indicates

that people in our society form attitudes and behavioral patterns through observing models that are evident on prime-time television shows. Much of the research focuses on children and their learning patterns, and the role behavior scripts they learn. Since our society spends so little time in teaching children about group process and group interaction, then it is likely they do formulate scripts for interacting in groups from watching these shows. Although Ellis and Armstrong are specifically focused on pragmatic or syntactic language codes, their conclusion that "language patterns on television provide role models for viewers and implicit messages about how people of different sexes and social class communicate" (p. 167) suggests that these ideas need to be tested for the group communication context.

Berman (1987) believes that sitcoms are intent upon presenting social problems and then suggesting solutions to those problems through the characters' actions. Through the format of the sitcom, "comedy tries to socialize us, change our habits, and make us better or display . . . examples of those who do not fit into an idealized social order" (p. 19). Certainly these six shows addressed social problems--nudity, dealing with a third person in a romantic relationship, pregnancy without marriage, stealing, the usefulness of older people, and families where both parents work. For each issue the audience is presented with an understanding or resolution to the problem through the interaction of the group.

## SUMMARY

A review of TV shows (as listed by the November Nielsen average audience estimates in World Almanac) since 1983 indicate that nearly half or more of the top twenty rated television shows have been built around a group context. This is significant, acknowledging that one third of the top 20 are movies, special programming, or sporting events. Clearly, there is an interest in focusing on groups and their interaction on prime-time television. The devotion to a group focus makes sense when one ponders just how much time is spent daily in groups. We live, work, play, and find support there. The American culture is group centered.

Although the objective of this study was not to detect fantasy themes, the themes identified by Schrag, Hudson, and Bernabo (1981) in Taxi, Barney Miller, Lou Grant, and M*A*S*H did appear to be evident in these six shows. The vision of the new humane collectivity develops from the fantasies of realization of significant others, the alliance in action, and membership into personhood. Schrag et al. comment that the themes represent a "humane, sympathetic awareness of and concern for the group, the individuals who comprise the group, and the society which surrounds it" (p. 9). They point out the significance of the humane collectivity as it

> directly confronts the most cherished ideals of the "me" generation by saying lives are dependent in one way or another upon other people and groups, that cooperation is an option in human interaction, that the greatest happiness, the most serious challenge, and the fullest understanding comes in the company of others. (p. 12)

I believe that the continuum I presented earlier about the qualitative feel I had for the "groupness" of each show reflects this collective vision. It seems reasonable that shows that take on this or other group centered visions will have to rely upon the interaction of the group to present that vision.

The group setting of these shows provides a mirror image of our real lives . . . our interaction is not just a sequential series of separate dyadic interactions but complicated by the network or web of groups within which we associate. These episodes reflect that embedded structure as work associates cross over to be friends within and outside the work context.

These episodes presented "snapshots" of group life and clearly invited the audience into the private world of characters. There was heavy reliance on viewer familiarity with past events, characteristic patterns of interaction, and resolution of earlier problems. The shows almost demanded that a viewer know what had happened in earlier episodes or even in previous seasons to get the jokes, or know the motivation for a character's behavior. Doors to problem and conflict resolution were left open just

wide enough to invite our curiosity and strengthen the probability that we would view again next week. Certainly the shows had a past, a present, and a future built into the interaction.

As a result of the snapshot approach to group interaction there was a general lack of attention to the consequences of character actions. I'd like to be a television character. It would be easy to get away with irresponsible or socially unacceptable behaviors and not be held accountable for them.

## IMPLICATIONS

Now having watched hours of group centered sitcoms and reflecting upon group communication as a teaching and research interest, I have several recommendations. First, Hough's (1981) definition of sitcom needs to be updated to reflect the current crop of sitcoms. I disagree that characters in sitcoms take irrational approaches to problem solving . . . too often in viewing these episodes I saw myself and others close to me reflected in the characters; the attitudes, patterns of interaction, rationalizations, and excuses of the characters are just a few I personally identified with. As Hough (1981) reflects upon more contemporary situation comedies, he comments that there is an increase in attention to "social content and intensified dramatic style. Humorous as the television writers may make them, these plots reflect the more serious problems of daily life, and they cannot be portrayed without some serious dramatic style" (p. 223).

Second, with respect to the field of group communication, I can make several recommendations. We need to more broadly define the nature of group goals and group tasks. I think the study of group communication would be profoundly more interesting if we incorporate in our research and teaching the spontaneous or "pick-up" groups that are a part of our lives. Although I spend a great deal of time in call-to-order groups, the spontaneous groups receive a lot of my attention, worry, and interest. The interaction in the pick-up groups shapes my overall interaction and perceptual patterns. Making conscious decisions to cut them out of the study of group communication is limiting our ability to reflect upon our

culture's use of groups and denying access to much of the interesting daily interaction.

Taking the transcribed interaction of these six episodes and subjecting them to an interaction analysis similar to that used by Skill, Wallace, and Cassata (1989) will give us more detail about group interaction. Expanding their interact style of coding to the group context and their focus on family interaction to other contexts of group interaction may help in identifying the turning points as groups work toward problem resolution. They find that

> the symbolic images of families on television tell us that the differences in family interaction patterns appear to be smaller than their similarities. Or, to put it in a more positive light, the similarities are indeed greater than the differences, leading us to the realization that when all is said and done, families are families are families. (p. 40).

If the further analysis of group interaction on prime-time television provides similar results (that a group is a group regardless of the socio-economic characteristics of the group, the context of the group, or the topic of the group interaction), then we do need to be concerned about the messages received from watching groups interact on television.

Appendix A

Groups Shows Considered For Analysis

| Show Title | # of Episodes Initially Videotaped & Analyzed |
|---|---|
| Cheers | 7 |
| The Cosby Show | 8 |
| Day By Day | 1 |
| Designing Women | 7 |
| A Different World | 5 |
| Dream Street | 1 |
| Dynasty | 5 |
| Empty Nest | 2 |
| Golden Girls | 8 |
| Hunter | 2 |
| Dear John | 6 |
| LA Law | 7 |
| Married With Children | 6 |
| Newhart | 1 |
| Roseanne | 10 |
| Thirtysomething | 1 |
| TV 101 | 3 |
| 21 Jump Street | 6 |
| Wonder Years | 1 |

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